

From Orality to Writing

The Palimpsest of the Purāṇas

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The move from orality to writing constitutes one of the defining moments in the history of mankind. In the Indian subcontinent writing was introduced under the rule of the Buddhist king Ashoka (3rd c. BCE), after many centuries of oral composition and transmission of the ritual compositions of the Vedas. A genre of literature that continues a bardic tradition is that of the Puranas, which constitutes the most prolific and voluminous body of Sanskrit literature. The apparently oral character of the Puranas is reflected in their dialogical structure, which typically involves a bard narrating stories of the primordial past to groups of assembled sages. Material evidence of the Puranas, however, indicates that it rather constitutes a massive manuscript culture, one of the biggest in the world, with thousands and thousands of handwritten manuscripts surviving in libraries in India and beyond. This paper will address the vexed question of the oral versus the written nature of the Puranas, specifically by investigating how these written texts were anchored through the use of oral formulas and the notion of a ‘descent of the scripture’. It will also deal with the ritual practice of copying and donating Purana manuscripts, which displays similarities with the more well-known Buddhist practice of the ‘cult of the book’, and the role of manuscripts in the transmission of the Puranic worldview in new spaces, in particular the Indianized kingdoms of Southeast Asia. All in all, the paper aims to contribute to an understanding of the palimpsest of the Puranas and the cultural significance of committing words to writing in the Puranic ecumene.

Select Bibliography

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